

SOMETHING

ABOUT

O B E A H,

BY

HERBERT T. THOMAS,

(Inspector Jamaica Constabulary.)

MORTIMER C. DESOUZA, PRINTER,
7, CHURCH STREET, KINGSTON.

1891.







John F. Goucher
Number

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A CAVE whose mouth is screened by a tangled curtain of convolvuli, or a low thatched cabin in a shadowy grove of mango, naseberry, star-apple and cocoanut; a lean, blear-eyed, rag and skin-clothed figure mumbling strange words in some barbarous African dialect over a pot in the middle of the apartment—cavern or hut—in which an unsavoury decoction seethes; a yellow boa coiled in a corner, while pendant from the walls, or heaped in confusion about the floor, are alligator skins, birds' heads and feathers, the feet of fowls, a human bone or two, a grotesque wooden image crowned with plumes, plantain leaves enwrapping powders and potions of fell potency, and all the other paraphernalia of witchcraft. Then a half resolute, half timid raising of the leafy curtain, followed by the entrance of a pretty quadroon girl, a muttered confabulation, the gleam of gold, and its answering flash in the evil eye of the myal-man, and the departure of his client with a love-philtre or some deadlier compound hidden in the bosom of her dress.

Such is the stereotyped scene with which almost every novel treating of West Indian life has made us familiar, and no doubt the description was true enough to nature; for it is not so long since the craft of the obeahman was a sufficiently powerful agent for evil in the land to call for its repression by legislative measures. It is my purpose now to record the observations of an experience extending over a good many years of frequent contact, in a professional sense, with obeah and obeahmen, to expose its workings as far as lies in my power, and to do all I can still further to weaken the influence which this superstition yet wields in this country notwithstanding the opposing forces of religion and education.

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The origin of the obeah superstition undoubtedly lies in that worship, with a view to conciliation, of the Spirit of Evil, which is a common characteristic of the rude religions of most African tribes, particularly of those inhabiting the interior and the West Coast, whence the original slave population of this island was derived. Viewed by the light cast upon it by recent explorations, the daily life of these seems such a precarious one that it ceases to be a matter of wonder that they should regard the Evil as predominating over the Good. Surrounded by gloomy forest and fetid swamp, the haunt of harmful creatures; often falling a prey by the score to small-pox and other loathsome diseases the deadly infection of which they are powerless to avert; liable to sudden raids at the hands of more powerful neighbours, to see their men and infants butchered and their women and boys carried off by the slave-hunter, it is small wonder that every stranger is regarded as an enemy, and that the "struggle for life" is a bitter one indeed. Among them the fetishman is a power, real and awful, and as such he continued to be regarded after their transportation to the West Indies, where, although in contact with civilization, and freed from the constant physical danger that beset their steps in their native wilds, their mental and moral condition remained almost precisely the same.

I do not know whether the origin of the word Obeah has been defined by any philological authority; but if I am not mistaken, I think it has been traced by one of our most profound scholars, the Revd. John Radcliffe, to the same root as the Greek word signifying "a serpent." A snake of some sort has always been, and is even now, held to be indispensable to the equipment of a practitioner of any pretensions to distinction, and a stick surrounded by a carved serpent embracing it in its folds is a frequent emblem of the calling.

The obeahman as he formerly existed in Jamaica was a standing menace to the social order of the country, and this appears to have been realised by the legislators of the land as far back as the year 1845, when the Law 19 Victoria chap. 30, was passed, which gave to the executive authorities very comprehensive powers to deal, not only with the obeahmen themselves, but also with those who sought their services. This act was further amended, and the powers conferred by it increased, by the enactment, 21 Victoria chap. 24.

Under these two acts prosecutions are brought up to the present day. In those days the obeahman possessed an extensive knowledge of the properties of certain herbs, principally of such as were fatal to

human life, either cutting it off by a swift and sudden death, or slowly and gradually, but surely, sapping its strength and causing the wretched victim to pine and wither away to his end. In outlying districts, with imperfect means of communication, indifferent medical aid and defective judicial arrangements, both administrative and executive, perfect impunity for the poisoner was ensured; while even nearer to the centres of civilization, with improved facilities in all these respects, the absence of any traces left by the fatal substance caused the same result. Even now, I believe, there are one or two vegetable poisons that defy analysis by the latest and most approved methods known to modern science. It is appalling to think how many a life must have been sacrificed in those old, dark days through jealousy or greed of gain, and how many a murderer must have gone unreached by the avenging arm of the law. Isolated cases still occur—notably one in St. Ann's some ten or twelve years ago—but the fangs of the obeahman have been drawn, thanks to the march of civilization, and our means of protection, which will bear comparison with those of almost any country in the world. The obeahman still exercises an evil influence, though, in a far wider sense than is commonly supposed, an influence that acts strongly counter to those of education and religion. Professional obeahmen may be, roughly speaking, divided into two classes. First, there is the grossly ignorant, depraved, benighted being, generally an African by birth or parentage, who firmly believes in the art which he professes, although he lives within a stone's throw of a church or opposite to a school. He usually has a "wall-eye" or some other peculiar facial deformity which is supposed to invest him of necessity with the mystic power, and added to it, not unfrequently, a "sore foot" in a highly offensive condition. He is generally miserably poor, at least in outward appearance, and his fee small, but he does a good trade. Two prominent types of this class it has recently been my good fortune to introduce to the interior of the St. Catherine's District Prison, and an account of their detection and capture may interest my readers. The first, named Peter Morrison, was taken *flagrante delicto* during the sitting of the Circuit Court in Morant Bay. A man was being tried for maiming a steer, the crime having been committed eighteen months previously. During the trial Peter, on whom a watch had been set for certain reasons, was observed to be walking up and down at the back of the court, gesticulating with his hands in the direction of the judge and jury and muttering indistinctly. This was allowed to go on for some time, then Peter was removed to the station and searched. The only article found in his possession was the head of a small china doll,

the eyes of which were bandaged with a piece of black cloth. This was the charm which was supposed to ensure the acquittal of the prisoner. It proved sufficient, together with Peter's reputation, in the carrying out of the laws above mentioned to ensure his incarceration for several weeks. Fortunately, also, the prisoner under trial was convicted and sentenced to twelve months imprisonment. Had the result been otherwise Peter's conviction would have availed nothing; he would have been regarded as a martyr, and would have returned from temporary seclusion armed with threefold power.

The other case presented the following circumstances :—A bad case of cattle-wounding occurred on a property in St. Davids, and two brothers were arrested on suspicion. We came to know that a practitioner of great repute, named Kellerman, had been consulted by the wives of the accused. This Kellerman, a man of over sixty years of age, was in the habit of receiving clients from a distance of forty or fifty miles away. Unfortunately for him his eyesight was very defective, partly by reason of age and partly owing to the "wall-eye" above-mentioned. On a certain day two myrmidons of the law, disguised in unpretentious costume, visited Kellerman, representing themselves as relatives of the accused hailing from Portland. He asked them at once whether they had brought the needful; and they, having provided themselves with the indispensable bottle of rum, replied in the affirmative. A libation was then solemnly poured out and swallowed by the obeahman who, warmed by the generous fluid, entered into conversation, told them not to fret about their cousin, and boasted about former successes of his—his specialty being "Court" cases—alluding particularly to the case of a woman charged with attempting to poison, who had been discharged at the preliminary investigation about a year previously, there not being sufficient evidence against her. He then produced a package of coarse powder consisting of the dried and crushed leaves of some herbs, and placing a little of it in the extended palm of one of the men, told him to blow it away. He did so, and then the other went through the same process. After another drink of rum Kellerman enclosed a quantity of the powder in a piece of paper, and told the men to give it to the wife of one of the accused and to shew her what to do with it; that as she blew away the powder, so the case against her husband would be blown away. He finally said that the men shouldn't only have chopped the cow, but should have killed it and brought home the meat for them all to eat. These two bold, bad policemen then enquired of Mr. Kellerman if that was all; and he replied that there was nothing left but the payment; whereupon, to his

intense disgust, they informed him that they were constables, and forthwith haled him off to the nearest station, which residence he exchanged a few days later for a lodging at the expense of the country in Spanish Town.

The other class of obeahman is often a man of strikingly good physique, respectable appearance, and always decently dressed. He does more in the "duppy catching" line, and does not accept a small fee. (Of the art of "duppy-catching" I shall speak later on.) This species is, generally speaking, of too much intelligence to believe in the efficacy of his charms, his motives for adopting the calling being the ease with which it earns for him an ample competence, and the facilities it affords him for gratifying his animal passions, debauchery being the principal feature of his ceremonial, which is always conducted in the presence only of himself and his victim. I have only succeeded in cutting short the career of one gentleman of this class lately, but one or two others shall have due attention shortly.

The man who is generally acknowledged to be the *Pontifex Maximus* of the craft, the premier practitioner of the island, with a *clientèle* extending into almost every parish, resides, as might be expected, in the metropolis, where, indeed, he is said to occupy a position of some prominence in other respects. But one and all, high and low, are shielded and may practise for years without having to answer to the law, by the extreme difficulty of obtaining the necessary evidence against them. I have seen a strong man turn the colour of ashes, and the cold sweat run down his cheeks, while in the witness-box having the evidence wrested from him piece by piece, and having constantly to be ordered to look at the bench instead of at the obeahman at the bar fixing him with a stony stare. I remember one case in which a man of respectable position waited outside an obeahman's house at dead of night, while his wife, on whose behalf he had sought the obeahman, was alone with him inside; and it was only when he was taken to the jalousies by the police, who were also watching the house, and shewn by them through a crevice what was taking place within that he consented to give his assistance, to become a party to the prosecution of the obeahman, and to reveal certain circumstances which were wanting to complete the chain of evidence in a case of which this was an episode. I know of another case in which the dread of obeah power kept closed for three years the mouth of a man who had seen two persons carry the corpse of a woman whom they, or one of them, had just brutally murdered, along a lonely path, and deposit it at the

door of a house in which she had been staying with a relative. This relative and his wife were of course arrested on suspicion, but managed to clear themselves. Three years later remorse—or most probably the death of the obeahman—unsealed his lips, and his evidence contributed mainly to the conviction and hanging of the murderer. And there had been a reward of £100 offered all the time ! These are a few illustrations, selected from a varied experience, of the baneful influence that this degrading superstition still exercises among the lower classes. Nor is it confined to the peasantry alone. There have been and there are now, cases of men of good position, men belonging to the “classes,” men who have received an English education, who have been brought by their surroundings under its influence so completely as to become mere tools in the hands of designing and unprincipled women.

Among the paraphernalia of the craft may be enumerated all kinds of rubbish. Wooden images, doll’s heads, bits of looking glass, fowl-bones, the skins of snakes and frogs, the comb and beak of a cock, a pack of cards, a razor, tiny carved calabashes, a bit of brimstone enclosed in a small bag, powdered touchwood and numerous other articles of no earthly value in themselves, but all supposed to be endowed with magic power, are to be found in the possession of every obeahman when a “haul” is made. I have not come across any snake sticks lately. The last I saw was confiscated from a notorious criminal named Garvey, who has been convicted in nearly every parish in the island of nearly every conceivable offence, obeah included.

Of the ceremonial little is known to me from trustworthy sources. On grand occasions, where the practitioner belongs to the aristocracy of the craft, the orgies, I have reason to believe, are something entirely beyond description ; the instincts of the primitive savage are awakened, and it is easy to imagine that the rites could culminate in the human sacrifice that is said to accompany kindred ceremonies in Hayti. One thing is quite certain, that any white person, or any person belonging to the upper classes who ventured to intrude there, would do so at the imminent peril of his life. Nudity, whole or partial, is an indispensable condition, of the females especially, and the whole scene is one of savage and drunken debauchery.

I know that many who read this will say that I am exaggerating and that such things are impossible. I can assure them, however, that I do not speak without sufficient warrant ; and I would ask them whether they have any idea of what takes place at those “revival” meetings that are held almost nightly in Kingston. These people, as

long as they commit no breach of the law, enjoy the privilege that every Englishman does of his house being his castle, and therefore cannot be molested; we must only trust to education and the influence of civilization, which we hope will now work more actively than ever, as the result of our Exhibition, to render practices of this kind things of the past.

The ordinary procedure is a very simple one, such as I have described in the two cases quoted above. It varies according to circumstances. The blood of a white cock, particularly if he be of the breed known as "senseh," is a potent charm, as is also a little dirt from a grave. If a love-philtre is wanted, a portion of the underclothing of the desired object must be brought, and a little of the hair if possible. To do damage to the crop or stock of an enemy a little of the dried excrement of some animal, a couple of rotten eggs and some other filth are buried in his field or in his yard near the pigsty.

"Duppy catching," a branch of the art above alluded to, finds a great many votaries. A child suffers from epileptic fits, a woman is barren, or a man is troubled with an incurable ulcer. The "duppy-catcher" is consulted and they are told that so-and-so has "set a duppy" on them, which he, for a consideration, undertakes to catch. A night is fixed for the operation, rum is provided, perhaps a white cock killed, feasting, drinking and drumming, with occasional intervals of manipulation of the body of the patient, continue all night, and if successful, the duppy is caught, enclosed in a bottle, taken away and buried. Very often, however, and particularly if the female patient be young and handsome, the first ceremony proves unsuccessful, and a second, or perhaps a third, has to be performed. I have heard quite lately of a girl who was working on a sugar estate, and suffered from an ulcer on her leg. She disappeared from the estate for some days, and on her return was asked by the overseer what had become of her. She replied that "they had set duppy upon her" and she had been to the duppy-catcher to be relieved of it. This reply was given in perfect good faith and in the most unembarrassed manner. That duppy-catcher's practice is now in imminent jeopardy. Another one, whose patient was a child suffering from epileptic fits, was persuaded to change his residence for one of the prisons of the colony, and he now finds his provision ground a more profitable source of income.

I have now endeavoured to give some outline of the nature of a superstition, the existence of which, in its various ramifications, is a great fact in the social condition of the country. The hold which it

has on the minds of the lower orders can scarcely be realised except by those who have made the subject a study, as I have. In certain districts of the island, if fifty per cent. of the adult members of any given church were called upon at some crucial moment, privately and individually, to choose between the minister and the obeahman, I would offer long odds on the latter were I a sporting man. A Wesleyan minister with whom I was very well acquainted, a man of high intelligence and a restless energy, the value of which has since been recognised by his Church, and one who had devoted a good deal of attention to this same subject, told me that he once witnessed the following occurrence at night in a Kingston street. He saw a leading member of one of the churches in conversation with a man who was a reputed obeahman, and was deriding his profession of religion. He laughed to scorn the parson and the influences of religion, and wound up by throwing on the ground his snake stick. "There now," he said, "I dare you to take up that stick off the ground."

The stick was left lying.

Of the minor details appertaining to obeah practice it is in the very nature of things almost impossible to obtain precise information; and were such information obtained most of it would be unfit for publication. Some of the evidence that I have heard dragged out in court is not fit for any place outside the walls of a court house.

I think that in helping to expose this degrading superstition as far as possibly I can I am doing a certain amount of service to my country, and that is my object in writing this article, as I have already stated. In order further to effect this I have now on exhibition a collection of obeah charms, implements, and materials, a complete catalogue of which is given below. These have all been collected from recently convicted obeahmen, some of whom are mentioned above. I have also procured through the kindness of Inspector Alexander fetish charms brought from the region which is the home of the obeah superstition. The superior quality of these, and the contrast between them and the useless rubbish and filth used by the obeahmen of Jamaica serve to illustrate how the cult of obeah worship has deteriorated on the soil of Jamaica. Let us hope that the day is not far distant when it will die out altogether. And I have great hopes that the mere fact of this exhibit, labelled with the names of the men from whom the various articles were taken will deal such a blow to obeah as shall be worthy of the "Awakening of Jamaica," the dawn of which is heralded by this our Exhibition.

CATALOGUE.

A.

African fetish charms, used by the Mendi tribe on the West Coast, and obtained after the bombardment of Robarri by an expedition in which the 1st Bat. West India Regt. took part in 1887.

1. Horn of young Fretambo (species of antelope) filled with snake and alligator fat and a jegga, or small shell, with a three penny piece on top.
2. Switch made of leaves of the koos-koos grass stitched into a piece of African country cloth and ornamented with jeggas.
3. A charm to be worn round the neck or any other part of the body, ingredients unknown.
4. A piece of white calico in which the above articles are kept wrapped up when not in use.

B.

A book of certificates kept by a Bush-doctor, or Duppy-catcher in the parish of Clarendon, attesting his wonderful cures of "madness, child-birth," and other extraordinary complaints. These appear all to have been written by himself.

C.

Original of an agreement made between one Fleming and an obeahman named Fraser in the parish of St. Thomas.

D.

Charms and implements seized in possession of various obeahmen :—

Charles Lawrence, Westmoreland.

1. A number of blood-stained pieces of calabash strung together, forming what is known as a "jeggeh."
2. Tin containing some unknown substance, possibly excrement of some animal.

George Eason, Westmoreland.

1. Piece of gum from some tree.
2. Bottle containing liquid composition.
3. Bag with a few grains of rice.
4. Tin containing bits of horseshoe nails and caraway seeds.
5. Tin containing myrrh.
6. Do. do. sulphur.
7. Do. do. myrrh and frankincense.
8. Do. do. resin.
9. Do. do. camphor.
10. Do. do. caraway seed.

11. Powder made from dried herbs, unknown.
12. Small pocket mirror.
13. Pack of cards.
14. Bag containing pieces horse-shoe nails and broken bottle.
15. Phial with peppermint.
16. Glass marble.
17. Phial containing quicksilver, the cork stuck with pins.

Emanuel Freeman, St. Thomas.

1. Small mirror.
2. Cards.
3. Calabash cup.
4. Razor.
5. Purse containing pieces broken bottle.

Charles Fraser, St. Thomas.

1. Chips wood and old rags.
2. Garlic and rags.
3. Calabash cup.
4. Alum.
5. Pieces of chalk.
6. Bottle of medicine prescribed and compounded for his victim.
7. Bag containing brimstone, to be worn as a guard

Peter Morrison, St. Thomas.

Doll's Head, bandaged with black cloth.

James Richards, St. Thomas.

Parcel containing myrrh, *grey human hair*, bladder, asafœtida and herb roots.

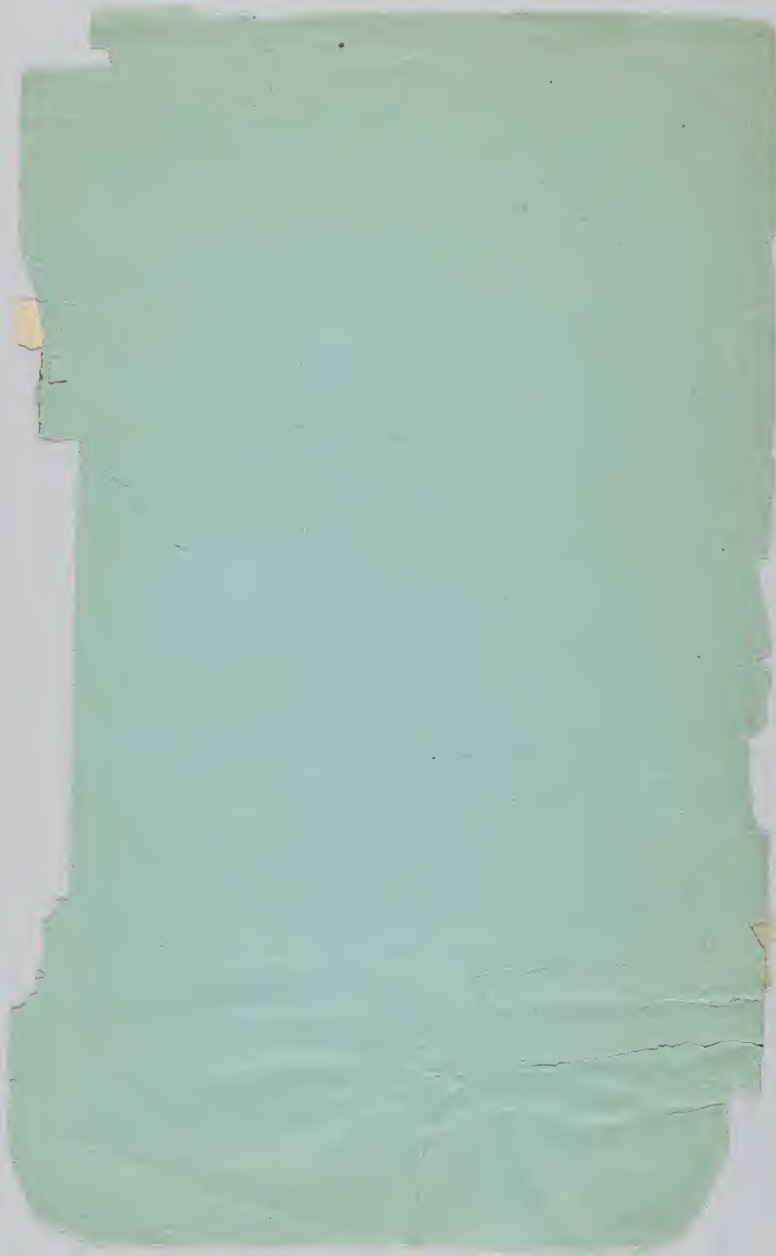
William Brown, St. Thomas.

1. Part of a cow's horn.
2. Cards.
3. Chalk stones.
4. Quassia bean.
5. Magnet,
6. Charm.
7. Sulphur.
8. Pieces of Charcoal.
9. *Portion of female underclothing.*
10. *Human hair.*
11. Herbs, unknown.
12. Dried herbs and charcoal powdered and mixed.
13. Ashes.

Alfred Minot, St. Thomas.

1. Cards.
2. Iron hinge staples.

NOTE—Since the above was in print an image has been added to the collection, which was seized in St. Thomas some years ago and sent to England as a curiosity.



~~RE~~ The case of Exhibits having been removed from the Exhibition Building by order of the Executive Committee, after being there for ten days, the Catalogue is of no further use.